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Mr. Sorensen Withdraws

THE COLLAPSE OF THE nomination of Theodore Sorensen to be Director of Central Intelligence amounts to the bleeding of Jimmy Carter—even before he has officially assumed office. Neither his preinaugural “honeymooner’s” status nor his party’s dominance in Congress, he found, was sufficient to win confirmation for the former Kennedy aide. It is no doubt a keen disappointment for the President-elect. But unless he makes it so, it need not be a disaster. It is merely a reminder, more clear-cut than most, that a President does not so much run the government as share control of it. This, you could say, is Political Lesson No. 1.

Keep in mind that the Sorensen nomination was in trouble from the start. A titan has not been brought down: a political figure has run afoul of the reservations stirred by his own controversial career. We ourselves, while admiring Mr. Sorensen’s mind and pen, asked when he was nominated if either his particular political and legal background or his reputation as a Kennedy loyalist qualified him for the post. Others raised other questions—granted, not all of them equally serious. But many people, from across the political spectrum, wondered whether Mr. Sorensen was the right man.

This is not to say that Mr. Sorensen did not have good reason to protest, as he did yesterday before he withdrew, the “scurrilous and unfounded personal attacks which have been anonymously circulated against me”—regarding his use of White House papers, his personal views on non-violence, and so on. Mr. Sorensen rebutted these attacks with persuasive eloquence, we thought. But we must at once add that it is something quite apart to contend, as did Sen. George McGovern in defending him, that “the real reason” for the failed nomination lay in those leaks. “The ghost of Joe McCarthy still stalks the land,” Mr.

McGovern declared. Those are Pavlovian words. They are also, in this context, absurd.

Mr. Sorensen himself noted that there was substantive opposition to him on the basis that he was not from within the military-intelligence establishment and that he believes in more open government and in the application of moral and legal standards to national security decisions. But we do not think that explains the intensity and scope of the opposition. For all the awkward reluctance of the Senate Intelligence Committee yesterday to render a clear public accounting, there was something else for which these substantive considerations, and the leaks, constituted a stalking horse.

Mr. Sorensen is identified in the minds of many—ourselves included—not only with devoted service but also with indiscriminating allegiance—personal loyalty beyond the bounds of public duty—to the President he served and to his brothers. It is hard to say so out loud; certainly it is hard to say so in a chamber of the U.S. Senate. We got the impression, nonetheless, that a substantial majority was unwilling to entrust some of the most sensitive and secret responsibilities of government to a man whose judgment many of them privately question. Not every senator with doubts about Mr. Sorensen stood on this “high” ground. But that seemed to be the burden of the privately articulated suspicions of him.

It is a comment of sorts on Mr. Carter that neither questions about Mr. Sorensen’s character nor apprehensions about the Senate’s possible reaction to the nomination seem to have blipped earlier on his personal radar screen. But Mr. Carter now has a second chance. He should accept, we believe, that the first requirement in the person who manages the intelligence community and advises the President on intelligence is high integrity. Other considerations are secondary. We await Mr. Carter’s next choice.